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SOVIET AIRLIFT DOCTRINE & CAPABILITIES -- AN OUTSIDER'S VIEW IN 1990

BY

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As peace continues to break out all over Europe and force reductions rapidly follow, the need to change military thinking and paradigms becomes an imperative. To date, Soviet forces have been asked to leave Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany. Conventional Forces Europe (CFE) talks should further reduce the number of US/Soviet forces facing each other over the East-West borders. Force projection will become an even bigger issue for

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SOVIET AIRLIFT DOCTRINE & CAPABILITIES--

AN OUTSIDER'S VIEW IN 1990

An Individual Study Project

by

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ABSTRACT

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As peace continues to break out all over Europe and force reductions rapidly follow, the need to change military thinking and paradigms becomes an imperative. To date, Soviet forces have been asked to leave Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany. Conventional Forces Europe (CFE) talks should further reduce the number of US/Soviet forces facing each other over the East-West borders. Force projection will become an even bigger issue for the USSR when their troops are not forward deployed and a crisis develops internationally. The purpose of this paper is to show that even with restructuring and "new thinking," the Soviets have a very real and credible combat force projection capability. With their modernized military transports and large airborne forces, they have a formidable potential to influence events far from their borders, a fact we in the West cannot ignore. Keywords: Foreign military forces; military force levels; Military doctrine; Airlift operations; (FSU)

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

As we begin the last decade of the twentieth century, the international situation continues to change at an explosive rate. With the blessings of Moscow, Eastern Bloc countries are throwing off the chains of Stalin-style communism. Political implications of this move towards freedom are still uncertain. However, military observers should recognize the need, in these unstable times, to keep a clear mind and "dry powder."

In the Soviet Union, the winds of change are blowing at gale force. International expectations are that Soviet troops will withdraw from East European nations, either partially or totally, in the near future. Mr. Gorbachev has announced several unilateral troop reductions, starting with a pledge to reduce the Soviet Army by 500,000 men. Other changes within the USSR are no less dramatic. News media within the country are openly criticizing military actions taken in troubled republics during civil disturbances. Senior military leaders are responding in an increasingly open news media to

these charges of excess on the part of the Soviet Army. Events of this kind would have been unheard of as recently as one year ago. Throughout this period of change and restructure, the prudent military observer needs to keep his/her eye on a potential opponent's capability and let the diplomats argue about that opponent's intent.

With the idea of capability uppermost in mind, I will look at the Soviet capability to project combat force outside of the Soviet Union in a time-constrained atmosphere. I will focus on the USSR's force projection capabilities based on its airlift and airborne forces.

Russian/Soviet history is replete with examples of force projection, on a tactical level, using trains, trucks, horses, or feet to transport the Armed Forces. However, examples of strategic force projection are few and far between. By strategic force projection, I am referring to moving forces into an area or country that is not adjacent to the USSR. In fact, the "crisis" may dictate the need to move forces several hundred miles across numerous international borders or oceans.

As Soviet forces, especially the Soviet Army, are pulled farther back into the "Rodina" (motherland) the ability to influence crisis situations in far away places (the Middle East, for example) could rely more and more on airlift and

airborne forces capability. After all, surrogates can only do so much and, if the issue involves strategic resources (like oil) or critical trade routes or markets, most nations care enough to send their very best.

In this study project, I will address Soviet airlift doctrine as observed from the outside. Much has been written by Western writers about Soviet doctrine. Little is said about airlift doctrine, so I will use observations on past airlift employments to form the basis for my ideas. After looking at doctrine, I will turn to a brief discussion of Soviet airlift aircraft. My primary focus will be on medium- and long-range transports and not dwell on helicopters or short-range aircraft. This discussion will be followed by a look at airborne force structure.

After looking at doctrine and strategic power projection forces, I will cover capabilities--past and current. This will allow a clearer understanding of how the Soviets see themselves and how they have used force projection in the past. The final chapter will detail my conclusions. I will show that the Soviets have a very real, credible strategic force projection capability that appears to be getting better as they modernize their transport fleet. I do not want to imply or leave the reader with the idea that the Soviets have

no problems in this area or that they are "ten feet tall." They are not! And they have some major problem areas. However, the fact that Soviet airborne forces have only been used with front armies and the fact that only in 1973 were airborne forces prepared for a strategic deployment should not lock the Western military observer into a dangerous paradigm. We should not overlook this serious potential for strategic power projection. The Soviets have the doctrine and the forces. All they need is the reason to utilize this capability.

CHAPTER II

DOCTRINE

Any time someone enters a discussion on doctrine, he or she enters into a murky area at best. Doctrine is defined in Webster's New International Dictionary, second edition, as: " . . . that which is taught; put forward as true and supported by a principle or position."

Joint Chiefs of Staff Publication 1 defines doctrine:

> Fundamental principles by which the military forces or elements thereof guide their actions in support of national objectives. It is authoritative but requires judgement in application.[1]

Military doctrine gets a little more specific and should define in a general sense, what military forces do and why they do it. Ideally, doctrine should pull all the abstract pieces together and point toward establishing and achieving objectives. U.S. Air Force airlift doctrine states:

> Airlift objectives are to deploy, employ, and sustain military forces . . . As a combat mission, airlift projects power through airdrop, extraction, and airlanding of ground forces and supplies into combat . . . Airlift . . . accomplishes the timely movement, delivery, and recovery of personnel, equipment and supplies . . .[2]

Recognizing this is a "Western" definition of doctrine

in general and airlift doctrine in specific, I believe the basic ideas behind airlift doctrine are pretty universal. While strategy and tactics may vary widely from country to country, airlift doctrine worldwide deals with force projection using aircraft to airdrop or airland combat forces and/or supplies. I do not mean to state or imply that all airlift doctrine is equal. Each nation and culture will bring a different slant to its doctrine. For example, the Soviet Union, under the leadership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), places an equal amount of political and military emphasis on its doctrine. Soviet military doctrine has two basic dimensions: a political dimension stemming from political sources (CPSU) and purposes of war, and a military-technical dimension, concerning the science and employment of military power. This latter dimension embraces three levels of military art: strategy, operational art and tactics.[3]

The Soviet meaning of military doctrine is much different from United States military usage. The Soviet Military Encyclopedia defines military doctrine:

> . . . A system of views on the essence, goals and character of possible future war and the preparation of the country and the armed forces for that war and the manner in which it will be conducted. Doctrine is shaped by the socio-political and economic structure of the country, the means for conducting

war, and our geographical position.[4]

Soviet military doctrine has, as mentioned earlier, two closely tied and interrelated aspects - - socio-political and military-technical. The former is concerned with questions about the economic, social, and legal bases for achieving goals in a possible future war. The socio-political aspect is dominant in that it reflects the essence of the government and its political goals and is relatively constant over time. The military-technical side deals with military structure, technical equipping of the armed forces, their training and determination of the forms and means of conduct of military operations.[5]

The Soviet concept of military doctrine, representing the official policy of the CPSU, is a unified system of views and aims, free from private views and estimates.[6] In contrast to military doctrine, military science deals with preparation for and conduct of armed conflict and allows for differences of opinion. Military science encompasses: the theory of military science, the theory of military art (strategy, operational art and tactics), and force posture, among other things.[7] Focusing on military art, we find the primary component to be strategy. Strategy is defined as "the part of military art that studies the foundations of the preparation and conduct

of war . . . In practice it is policy's direct weapon."[8] Soviet theorists stress that war is conducted by combined actions of all the services of the Armed Forces and their combined arms, and that the coordination of all actions of the services in war is possible only within a framework of a single strategy. Thus, it appears we, in the West, use the term "military doctrine" while the Soviets use the term "military art" or strategy. Soviet doctrine, with emphasis on the socio-political, comes from the highest levels of the Soviet political leadership, while strategy is developed within the military.[9]

Soviet military art appears to stress preparation of the armed forces for war by both political and scientific means. One view translates this into combat readiness at the operational tactical level. If this combat readiness of the armed forces is added to the tactical element of surprise, we have all of the ingredients for a force projection effort. The Soviet airborne forces manual states the employment of airborne forces is "explicitly predicated upon the principles of mass and surprise. Initiative is recognized to be of unusual significance."[10]

While recognizing that Soviet military art is being rewritten to more fully incorporate the new "defensive

strategy" and with the potential withdrawal of Soviet forces from parts of Eastern Europe back to the borders of the "Rodina," the need for force projection will only increase. A key point here is that the ability of the Soviet Army to influence a crisis or situation outside of the USSR will decrease with distance.

Soviet military art allows a planning factor of moving the first strategic echelon of forces 300-400 km or more to reach the international boundaries.[11] If Soviet forces are pulled sufficiently far back, the crisis/situation and the speed necessary to influence it may very well dictate employment of airborne forces by aircraft. Soviet military art appears to be flexible enough to adjust to this requirement if the Kremlin leader(s) should decide Soviet interest dictate this application of force. Political realities of the 1990s may make this eventuality more likely than during previous years.

ENDNOTES

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7. Ibid., p. 69.

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CHAPTER III

POWER PROJECTION FORCES

In order to transition from military art to force projection, especially when distance and time constraints dictate an airlift force projection, I need to define a typical airlift effort:

> . . . the airlift effort will depend on four factors: first the availability of aircraft capable of moving massive numbers of troops, plus tons of supplies and equipment; second, the availability of trained aircrews and airborne troops who are knowledgeable in the type of operation they must execute; third, the availability of trained and equipped ground crews who can expedite the ground handling of aircraft, troops, and cargo; and finally, the availability of sound airlift doctrine upon which training programs, exercises, and operational requirements for new equipment can be built.[1]

As mentioned, a key part of a successful airlift operation, especially a rapid response to a contingency, is airborne forces and their equipment. This chapter will detail Soviet airlift forces by discussing current airlift aircraft and aircrews. After this discussion, airborne forces available for airdrop or airland operations will be looked at in detail.

Currently, the Soviet military establishment is organized

as the figure on the next page illustrates. Under Air Forces, the Soviets have Military Transport Aviation (VTA) and, in a secondary military mission, Aeroflot, the Soviet civil air transport organization. Aeroflot is under the Soviet Ministry of Aviation and has an active duty Air Forces officer as its chief.[2] This organization supplies 1600 long- and medium-range aircraft that provide immediately available troop transport capability. For example, Aeroflot personnel and aircraft carried the initial attacking forces, one airborne battalion, to Prague airport in the 1968 summer invasion of Czechoslovakia.[3]

It is not within the scope of this paper to list all types of Soviet transport aircraft and helicopters. I will only highlight the "prime movers" that have been in the past, and could be in the future, utilized for a strategic power projection operation.

The Antonov AN-12BP (NATO Cub) is a four engine, turboprop aircraft similar to our C-130 aircraft. This airlifter can carry 90 combat troops, 60 paratroopers, or over 44,000 pounds of cargo for a distance of 2,236 miles. With a maximum speed of over 480 mph, this aircraft is a formidable airlifter. Around 150 Cub aircraft continue to serve in VTA units located primarily along the southern and far eastern

periphery of the USSR. Another 200 serve with the Soviet air armies and air forces of the military districts and groups of forces.[4]

The Ilyushin IL-76 (NATO Candid B) is the workhorse of the VTA and is the Soviet counterpart to our C-141 Starlifter aircraft. Over 400 of these very capable aircraft are in operation today and the Soviets are replacing 40 AN-12 Cubs per year with the Candid B. This four engine, turbofan jet aircraft can carry 140 combat troops, 125 paratroopers, or over 88,000 pounds of cargo for a distance of almost 4200 miles. A cruise speed of almost 500 mph along with ground mapping radar and a pressurized cabin makes this a most capable strategic force projection aircraft. Packs of ninety-six 50 mm infrared countermeasures flares can be carried in the landing gear fairings and/or the sides of the rear fuselage of these aircraft when the mission calls for operations into a hostile area.[5]

Two other aircraft deserve mention in our force projection discussion, the Antonov AN-124 (NATO Condor) and the Antonov AN-225 Mriya (Dream). The AN-124 is the Soviet counterpart to our C-5 Galaxy with a slightly larger wing span and higher gross weight. This four engine jet aircraft has airlifted a payload of 377,473 pounds to an altitude of

over 35,000 feet. On another record setting occasion, this aircraft set a close-circuit distance record by flying 12,521 miles nonstop. By the summer of 1988, eighteen of these aircraft were operational in the USSR.[6]

The AN-225 is the largest aircraft in the world. In terms of takeoff weight and capability, this aircraft is a 50 percent scale-up of the AN-124 with six turbofan jet engines instead of four and gross weight increased from 405 to 600 metric tons. With an unchanged cross section, the 141 feet cabin could accommodate sixteen large freight containers or up to 80 Lada automobiles. This goliath can cruise above 525 mph and carry 440,900 pounds of cargo 2,800 miles.[7] There are very few pieces of equipment in the Soviet Army that one or the other of these two aircraft could not carry over a strategic distance.

If we look closely at the 606 aircraft assigned to VTA, add in the 1450 transports in other elements of the armed forces, along with the 1600 medium- and long-range Aeroflot aircraft, we have almost 3700 aircraft, with over half being jet powered. Potentially, a highly capable strategic airlift force. This capability is sufficient to carry two airborne divisions (8500 men each) in excess of 300 miles simultaneously or one airborne division over 1000 miles.[8]

Since 1981, the Soviets have augmented their lift capability by 72 percent. This trend is a result of the new AN-124 Condor heavy transport coming into service and the replacement of AN-12 Cubs with the IL-76 Candid long-range transport. [9] The Soviets are capable of inserting forces and providing them with airlift support, however their inflight refueling tanker aircraft are few in number. Therefore, most of their airlift aircraft are incapable of inflight refueling.[10]

Information on Soviet airlift aircrews is limited and reports that do surface tend to be negative in nature. For example, the Soviet press carried an article recently about an AN-12 Cub aircrew, usually a crew of six, that fell asleep inflight and crashed. Fatigue was attributed to an especially rough night drinking prior to the mission. Another story concerned an Aeroflot aircrew that had to land short of destination due to fights between the military passengers and the aircrew.

In the area of training, most airlift crews lack experience in overwater navigation and night flying. Further, aircrew and maintenance manning of the long-range transport aviation is insufficient currently to support a continued operation at high levels of activity.[11] This author's limited

experience with Soviet airlift aircrews in the Middle East and Finland led me to consider them lacking in proficiency for international flights. Their procedures for dealing with air traffic control and their radio discipline was not professional most of the time when I observed them. While recognizing these problems as serious, they are by no means overwhelming.

Turning to airborne troops, the outside observer finds a wealth of information. Each armed service has airborne troops. However, some of these troops are specially trained, parachute qualified soldiers/sailors while other airborne troops are any subunit or element of a regular motorized rifle division that can be deployed by helicopter. For the purpose of this paper, airborne troops are those specially trained, parachute qualified soldiers who could deploy via airdrop. These forces include regular airborne units, Special Forces Brigade units, and SPETSNAZ teams.[12]

The Soviets, in propaganda pieces, refer to airborne troops as "the winged infantry." Equipped with airtransportable, airdrop equipment such as light tanks, fighting vehicles, self-propelled artillery, and anti-tank weapons, these forces are "capable of acting with daring and resolve."[13]

Current Soviet airborne forces are organized into eight divisions. These divisions consist of just under 8500 officers and men and receive high priority in the manpower selection process. In peacetime, airborne forces are manned at full, wartime strength and are staffed by the best troops. These divisions have first choice of new personnel, before even the Strategic Rocket Forces and the Navy's submarine detachments.[14] All of these new personnel have completed pre-induction military training, a uniqueness shared only with the Strategic Rocket Forces. About half of the airborne inductees undergo pre-induction parachute training. The strong pride and cohesion of airborne units worldwide exists in the Soviet Army also. They appear to recognize the difficulty of making a man into a soldier and paratrooper in only two years, because Soviet airborne units tend to retain their soldiers longer.[15]

The command relationship of airborne units offers further insight into the unique nature of these forces. They are an independent arm of service and do not belong to any of the Armed Services. In peacetime, they are subordinated directly under the Minister of Defense, while in wartime they work for the Supreme Commander. The uniformed commander of airborne forces, even though he commands only eight divisions, has the

rank of General of the Army, the rank held by the commander-in-chief of Land Forces who commands 170 divisions. The entire strength of Military Transport Aviation is controlled by the commander of airborne forces anytime an airborne assault operation is underway.

Each of these eight divisions is a formidable combat force. Of the nine parachute battalions in a division, five have armored vehicles of great maneuverability and considerable firepower (BMD-1 armored personnel carriers.). In all, an airborne division has 180 armored personnel carriers, 62 self-propelled guns, 18 multiple rocket launchers, 36 field guns, 45 mortars, 54 anti-aircraft guns, more than 200 anti-aircraft rocket launchers, and more than 300 anti-tank rocket launchers. These divisions are fully motorized with over 1500 vehicles.[16]

SPETSNAZ, or special purpose troops, are another unit of airborne forces for our consideration. These forces are similar in training and talents to our own Special Forces. They plan to operate behind enemy lines, 100 to 150 km. They appear to be just like regular airborne units; however, they lack the regular unit's heavy equipment. SPETSNAZ troops are formed into companies with 115 officers and men. They usually operate in five to seven man teams, but can operate

as a company or as a brigade of 900 to 1200 men. Of special note here, the headquarters company of a SPETSNAZ brigade is made up of 70 to 80 specialists. These specialists are part of their military district's sports teams. As members of the sports teams they often travel abroad visiting many of the places they could potentially be called upon to operate in. For example, when the Moscow Military District team travels abroad, it goes under the title of the Combined Olympic Team of the USSR and travels to countries all over the world.[17] These people are not just amateur athletes, but are also professional soldiers.

If we stand back and take a hard look at the force projection potential of the Soviet Army today, I believe we find a well-trained, capable force. They appear to have the personnel and the equipment necessary to be considered a very credible force. The weakest link appears to be aircrew training. I believe this problem could be overcome rather quickly by using selected, key Aeroflot aircrews with international flying experience as lead crews for elements of a mass formation. The training of the airborne troops appears to be quite good and their associated equipment and command structure appears very functional at the strategic and tactical level.

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CHAPTER IV

CAPABILITIES - - PAST AND PRESENT

If the "Past is Prologue," a brief review of Soviet force projection should enable us to draw some lessons from history. While fully recognizing that the international situation is radically changing, especially in the Soviet Union, and scenarios calling for Soviet power projection seem totally unrealistic, professional military officers need to proceed with caution and "keep your powder dry." Who would have thought that in the fall of 1989 the Berlin Wall would crumble, taking the entire Iron Curtain with it. An excellent example of a radical change. However, another example of radical change occurred in 1978-79. In about one year's time, relations between Iran and the US went from staunch ally and trusted friend to antagonistic enemies. In this chapter, I will address several key developments in Soviet airborne employment before and during World War II. I will then look at two examples of Soviet power projection after the war.

The USSR was a pioneer in the development of airborne troops. As early as 1927, small airborne units were employed against outlaw bands in central Asia.[1] The first Red Air Force officer, Leonid Minov, put in charge of the

"experimental-training" parachute "demonstrations" set for August, 1930 in Voronezh, made his first parachute jump in June, 1930 near Buffalo, New York. The August demonstrations were the culmination of a set of ideas put forth in 1928 by M. N. Tukhachevsky, the Leningrad Military District commander, and his staff in a paper entitled "Operations of an Airborne Assault Force in an Offensive Operation."[2]

From Minov's initial demonstration with seven jumpers in August, 1930, the Soviets progressed to 600 jumpers in September, 1934 at another demonstration. The following September, in an exercise in the Belorussian Military District, 1800 paratroopers were successfully airdropped and 5700 more were airlanded. These troops were used "to disorganize control and operations of the rear area of the enemy."[3]

Soviet airborne doctrine and forces continued to grow throughout the 1930s as the fledgling Soviet aircraft industry produced larger, more capable transport aircraft. The TB-3, a four engine bomber, was converted to a transport that could carry 32 paratroopers in the late 1930s, a major step forward. At the battle of Khalklin-Gol in August, 1939, Soviet airborne troops made their first combat jump against the Japanese. This mission was to relieve Soviet ground forces temporarily cut off by the enemy. Although successful, these airdrops

were so small as to be unmentioned by most Soviet historians-- they were recorded only by one of the pilots who participated in the operation.[4]

Throughout the war, Soviet Airborne forces were employed at the tactical level in conjunction with land attacks. Drop zones were usually no more than 100 km in advance of the front with units being dropped that were seldom bigger than a battalion. The normal mission called for the paratroopers to hold a position for as long as 48 hours or until the tanks of the main force arrived.[5]

Several airdrops involving 400-500 paratroopers were ordered by Marshal Zhukov against the Germans in December 1941-May 1942. However, most of these were not successful due to a variety of reasons. Poor planning doomed most of them, while lack of aircraft or fighter support rendered the others ineffective. For example, in late January, 1942, General Zhukov ordered a night airdrop operation around the town of Luigi. Of the 102 fighter aircraft allocated for the operation, none were night fighters and only 19 actually flew. This type of sortie generation led to a piece meal operation that rendered the overall operation ineffective.[6]

One note of interest here. Recorded in Soviet airborne unit histories are several accounts of Soviet troops jumping

from low, slow flying transports into deep snow without parachutes. This is mentioned in the war with Finland (because Finnish marksmen would shoot over 80 percent of the paratroopers during their descent with chutes) and against the Germans in February, 1942 (because of the lack of chutes). Paratroopers have always been a hardy breed!

Several lessons became apparent to the Soviets when they reviewed the airborne operations of early 1942. The primary lesson was the planning factor. Supreme Headquarters in Moscow was producing the operations plans without bringing the Army Front Staff into the planning loop. This lack of coordination had the paratroopers landing without artillery fire support, enough aviation support or rapid rendezvous plans with troops of the front army. Another major problem identified was climatic conditions for the airdrops. The paratroopers employed in late February jumped in temperatures of -40 degrees celsius and conducted operations in areas covered with almost 6 feet of snow. To conduct operations under such conditions places an extreme burden on men and equipment. This is especially true if those men are raw recruits. Almost to a man, these troops were only just arrived from the training areas in the rear.[7]

One other airdrop deserves mention as we look at Soviet

capabilities in the past. In the fall of 1943, the Germans were retreating and looking for a place to make a stand to halt the Soviet advance. The west bank of the Dnepr, south of Kiev, was selected as a good place to build the "eastern wall." The Soviets decided their best move would be to reach the west bank before the Germans dug in. On the night of 19 September 1943, German panzers reached the east bank and found too few bridges to execute a rapid crossing. As the Red Army closed in, the Soviet high command elected to execute an airborne operation. This operation had been planned by airborne elements in the Supreme Headquarters and the front army. However, the Red Air Force staff was left out of the loop. When the call came to execute the operation, the Red Air Force was assigned the task and given command of the operation, even though the Red Air Force Staff had not participated in the planning. On the evening of 24 September, just under 5000 paratroopers were airdropped to seize a bridgehead. Intelligence for the first night's airdrops was not accurate or timely, resulting in the majority of the paratroopers landing in the middle of a German Panzer Corps. The paratroopers were "chewed to pieces" and the remaining airdrops were called off.[8] The Soviets elected not to use airborne forces in anything larger than small tactical

operations, sabotage, or co-operation with partisan forces after the fall of 1943 operations through the end of World War II.

Following World War II, Soviet airborne doctrine and missions remained basically unchanged. The only major exception was the addition of a mission to destroy NATO tactical nuclear weapons and delivery systems once they were deployed in the 1950's. In the early 1960's airborne units began to practice moving into areas that had just been hit (simulated) by nuclear weapons. The Soviets considered airborne landing forces the sole means for taking immediate advantage of results obtained with nuclear strikes against an enemy.[9]

As the aviation industry produced more and better aircraft, like the AN-12 Cub, AN-22 Cock and the IL-76 Candid, Soviet airborne capabilities began to catch up with doctrine. Exercises in the USSR in the late 1960's and early 1970's demonstrated combat power projection with 8,000 men being flown over 1000 Km and then airdropped to siege an airfield or key terrain. For example, one exercise in 1970 had 8000 paratroopers and 160 combat vehicles, including ASU-57s and BMDs, airdropped within 22 minutes on an airfield following a flight of 1,000 kilometers.[10]

Two examples of force projection by the Soviets in recent years need to be looked at briefly. In August, 1968 members of the 103rd Guards Airborne Division airlanded at Prague, Czechoslovakia.[11] Utilizing commercially painted Aeroflot aircraft, these troops secured the airport, the capitol, communications centers around Prague, and power plants. A total of 150 airland sorties were required to move the full division with its attendant equipment, fuel and supplies. Other airborne troops also seized the airfields at Kosica, Kladno, and Zatec, Czechoslovakia.[12]

Eleven years later members of the 105th Guards Airborne Division were utilized by Moscow to seize and secure Bagram airfield, a primary airfield 40 kilometers from Kabul, Afghanistan. On 24 December 1979, the first of 200 flights by AN-12, AN-22, and I1-76 aircraft landed at Bagram and Kabul airports bringing in about 10,000 airborne troops. After airlanding, these troops quickly secured key choke points such as Salang Tunnel and the seven largest airfields in Afghanistan. Up until withdrawal in February 1989, members of the 103rd, 104th, and 105th Guards Airborne Divisions were stationed in Afghanistan. These troops were not a part of the 40th Army, headquartered in Kabul, but reported to either the commander of the Turkestan Military District or the

commander of the Southern Theater of Military Operation (TVD).[13]

Airborne troops of the USSR today are the largest and best equipped force of its kind in the world. They appear to be prepared to exploit any weakness of any potential adversary and to do so quickly and powerfully.

ENDNOTES

1. Raymond L. Ganthoff, Soviet Military Doctrine, Illinois: The Free Press, 1953, p. 351.

2. Jacob W. Kipp and Kurt S. Schultz, Historical analysis of the Use of Mobile Forces by Russia and the USSR, Texas: Center for Strategic Technology, 1985, p. 163.

3. Ibid., p. 171.

4. Ibid., p. 176.

5. David C. Isby, Weapons and Tactics of the Soviet Army, United Kingdom: Jane's Publishing Co., 1981, p. 286.

6. Kipp, p. 183.

7. Ibid., p. 187.

8. Ibid., p. 192.

9. Ibid, p. 540.

10. Ibid., p. 545.

11. Isby, p. 286.

12. Kipp, p. 549.

13. Ibid., p. 551.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

Currently there are thirteen formations in the world that can be called airborne divisions. The U.S., West Germany, France, China and Poland each have one. The remaining eight belong to the Soviet Union.[1] Coupled with this force of parachute qualified soldiers is a modern, mostly jet equipped military aviation force of over 3500 medium- and long-range transports. Put these two sections together and you have a very formidable combat force projection capability. Utilizing flexible doctrine that allows airborne operations to be either strategic, operational, or tactical in scope and objective and relying on combat experiences from the Great Patriotic War, Soviet power projection for the 1990's appears to be as strong and viable as ever.[2]

Strategic operations could use airborne divisions as the long arm of Soviet power, projecting them great distances to establish a new theatre of operations or to siege bases or airfields of strategic importance. Although no precedence of this use exists in the post-war period, one Guards airborne Division was moved forward to Belgrade, Yugoslavia and placed on alert to go to the Middle East in 1973.[3]

The most numerous examples of Soviet force projection in the postwar era have been on operational missions. Regiments and division size units have been airdropped or airlanded 300-400 kilometers behind "enemy lines" or within other countries to seize key objectives--airfields, logistic centers, weapons storage sites, etc.

With all of the political changes that have come about in recent months within the USSR and the restructuring of Soviet forces and doctrine, several key points stand out. During other restructuring and realigning that have occurred over the years, Soviet Airborne forces have remained fully manned (Category I) and equipped with the best weapons. Command of these elite forces has remained at the Minister of Defense level.[4] Of equal importance, Soviet transport aircraft have continued to modernize and become more capable.

I realize that current political thinking, coupled with the current international situations, make a Soviet force projection (pictured in Figure 2) anywhere outside of the USSR seem extremely remote. And to be sure, the various Guards Airborne Divisions are indeed involved today in police actions within the USSR that closely resemble our own use of the 82nd Airborne Division in the late 1960's. However, we should not overlook the fact that times and circumstances change. I have

already made reference in this paper to how quickly US and Iranian relations changed. Events and circumstances could similarly change within the USSR.

The prime example of this potential for change was mentioned by a speaker to the Army War College Class of 1990 who mentioned a prediction in the not too distant future when the U.S. and the USSR have run out of oil and the Middle East nations still have 200 years of oil left. If we have not found other means of energy to replace oil, we could very quickly find ourselves going beak-to-beak with the Soviets in Saudi Arabia or one of the neighboring nations.

Conventional wisdom in the Pentagon appears to downplay the Soviet capability to project force outside of the USSR/Eastern Block and especially to the Middle East. Soviet Military Power, 1989 reflects the current paradigm that says Soviet force projection capabilities are not up to projecting force into outside areas, especially hostile, outside areas. I would submit history is full of military surprises where one side did what the other side did not think they could do. The Germans did not think the Allies would land at Normandy, the North Koreans did not believe the U.N. Forces could land at Inchon, and we do not believe the Soviets can/will project power into the Middle East.

The purpose of this paper is not to discuss Soviet intentions. The purpose is to clearly show that the Soviets have the doctrine and the forces, aircraft and airborne paratroopers, necessary to project power wherever the Soviet national command authority deems necessary. We should not allow the euphoria of our cold war "victory" to blind us to a very real, credible capability that exists today and appears to be getting stronger as the years go by.

ENDNOTES

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2. David C. Isby. Weapons and Tactics of the Soviet Army, United Kingdom: Jane's Publishing Company, 1981, p. 287.

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